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ABSTRACT

Since her involvement (as a 16-year-old) helping women get to their English-as-a-Second-Language classes, a graduate student and writing consultant has puzzled over the question of how to facilitate literacy. People need literacy for economic betterment. Literacy becomes a way out of psychological distress and a way of making sense of the world. She found that English Literature and Anthropology are invaluable tools for making sense of the world, both internal and external to the self. Literacy is something both gained and used in order to know the world. Teaching English Literature provides a support system to others so that they might know the world and themselves better. (SC)

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# Literacy Development: A Story of Community Support

by Mary Arnold Schwartz

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Literacy Development: A Story of Community Support

Sitting in the den with my left foot curled beneath me so that I sit higher at the mahogany desk the size of a kitchenette, I clear a little space for the list in front of me. It is Tuesday night, my after-dinner chores are finished, and I am calling number after number to find someone who can drive four women to English classes tomorrow night. I hope I sound older than my sixteen years.

The den is one of the coziest rooms of the house--three walls are lined with floor-to-ceiling bookshelves salvaged from a school library. There I have organized books according to subject matter: the *Harvard Classics*, reference, languages, mythology and religion on the south wall; the social sciences: history, economics, psychology, sociology, government--all subjects that Dad taught and in which Mom is interested--on the east and north walls. A wood-burning fireplace on the west. Permeating the room are scents of burnt hardwood and old books.

"Hello? This is Mary Arnold. May I speak with Tim, please? . . . He isn't home? Hm. Can you tell me when he might be home? Thank you. You see, when he participated in the Walk for Development last spring--yes, the hunger walk--he checked off that he wanted to help in other ways. We are looking for drivers to take Spanish-speaking people to English classes at the Benito Juarez Center. Does he drive? Yes? Well, I need drivers every Wednesday night, though he wouldn't have to drive every week. And I *especially* need a driver tomorrow. Would you ask him to call me back? Thanks. If I don't hear from him, would it be ok to call back after 7? Thanks loads; bye-bye."

Tim actually does call me back, and the next night, Wednesday, he picks me up at 5:30p.m. so that we can take the students to an old building with unpredictable heat in the center of town by 6:30p.m. We pick up a woman who lives in Westfield Village, a federal housing project built on drained swampland on our city's near west side, a woman who lives in what used to be an old Italian neighborhood now too run down for all but the oldest too stubborn or

In the car, the women practice their English just a bit and are very polite and patient while I practice my high school "Anglo" Spanish. One woman's daughter, who is in my class at South Side, teaches me swear words and colloquialisms, much to my delight. Mostly the women speak Spanish among themselves. Picking up takes time because we must always speak with family and friends at each home. One woman shows me how tortillas are made from scratch while she finishes making her family's supper before she can leave. We laugh a lot together.

too poor to leave, a woman who lives on the east side in what my drivers would call the "ghetto"--meaning mostly that poor blacks lived there, and another woman who lives in a mostly Spanish-speaking, very poor area about a mile further east. Sometimes the women bring friends, or they might have to bring their youngest children--for whom I will babysit during class. Since none of them have phones, I never know how many people will need rides, or whether I will get a car big enough to get everyone to class in one trip. Somewhat miraculously, what needs to happen always does.

From my spot in the back of the meeting room, where I keep any children occupied as quietly as possible during class, I find listening to the actual English lessons distressing. My sixteen-year-old self, a know-it-all, daughter-of-two-teachers who cannot imagine how the abstract lessons given by the tired and cranky, thirty-year-old woman high school English teacher can help the students communicate *now*. They need English *now* to apply for jobs or to fill out permission slips for their school age children. They need English *now* to talk with the landlord, the teacher and principal, and their own children who are learning English faster than they. They need English, and they

'Miraculously' is not the correct perspective for how things occurred. If I didn't have a driver, my father would reach for his lumbers (crutches) and head to the car. Although Dad and I talked often and with great animation about teaching--and he encouraged me in so many other ways, Dad *discouraged* me from entering the teaching profession. "You can't make ends meet on a teacher's salary."

need it fast! But how? I want to help, but what I do more frequently is to argue with Mrs. K, the teacher, who is at least as frustrated with the program as with me because she too is aware of the students' discouragement. Ever since--almost thirty years now, I have puzzled over this question of how to facilitate literacy.

First and foremost, I have seen literacy as what one needs for economic betterment: literacy is the way out of poverty, the way into the American dream for all newcomers and economically oppressed. As a teenager, I saw literacy simply as the acquisition of sufficient language skills in the *lingua franca*.

> *Crisis: The juncture of challenge and opportunity.*
> My version of an old Chinese proverb

However, after I end a six year marriage when I am twenty-three, and again ten years later when I recover memories of an early childhood trauma, I come to understand literacy as more than a way out of economic distress and more than the acquisition of skills with a foreign language. Literacy becomes a way out of psychological distress, and therefore, a way of knowing, a way of making sense of the world.

Each time I have faced a psychological crisis, I feel as if I were a child again. I begin to read voraciously: yes, self-help books, but also literature aimed specifically toward a young audience. Shortly after the divorce, I read the seven books of *The Chronicles of Narnia* by C. S. Lewis to my six-year-old as a bedtime ritual. They are as important to me as they are to Jenni, and we read until she falls asleep--or sometimes afterward, and I have to remember where we left off. I read others of C. S. Lewis's fiction during those years--*The Screwtape Letters* and *The Great Divorce*--books that are "light" or allegorical versions of his collection of theological treatises, *Mere Christianity*. Having to file for divorce, I then believed, shattered what little claim to respectability was left to me. Instead of going off to college as I had always planned, by

seventeen I was pregnant and quickly married. To avoid putting my child into daycare until she was older, I cleaned people's private homes and the pigsties left in emptied apartments. Afterward, I worked for $2.50 an hour for people who thought being able to do data entry work quickly and accurately (neither of which I could do) reflected a person's intellectual capacity. I feel like such a loser. Nevertheless, *Mere Christianity* reassures me that, at the very least, God wants me, embraces me in forgiveness and love, *and* the book leads me to see that, while I cannot retract the past, I could certainly go forward toward the respectability I desire.

By the time I was six, I had three younger brothers, so I remember more about helping to care for babies than about being read to or being taught to read at home. But I have no doubt that both my parents read to me and participated in my education. When Sr. Bernadette, my first grade teacher, asked me how I knew some of the sight words we were learning, I piped up: "My daddy taught me." He also taught me Latin and Greek root words so that I could forge ahead as reading took off for me. By the time I was eight I had read all of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women Series* (*Eight Cousins* eight times), and many of Gene Stratton Porter's Limberlost series (*The Magic Garden* several times), books Mom introduced to me. I read everything I could get my hands on--from comic books to Nancy Drew to the manual for explaining sex to adolescent boys hidden behind other books at home. The biweekly bookmobile stopped just down the road, and I was devastated if I missed it. That's probably how I came to read *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad* by the time I was ten.

During my next psychological crisis, respectability is no longer an issue. In the process of trying to make sense of a recurrent pre-sleep nightmare, I open the pathway to childhood memories long repressed. In horror of what I find, I contract within myself and can barely stand to hear my children's normal whining or crying for the cacophony of grief within. I seek out help from a counselor with his Master of Social Work, and I join a peer support group for women who have experienced violence in their lives. I talk with my close friends on the phone. While their help and support are invaluable to me, I find I am reading nonstop again--or at least as nonstop as a wife and mother of four children ages 9 months to 16 can. Self-help or healing

I feel as though I've gone on a journey 20,000 leagues under the sea: the action all takes place under the surface. My husband can be more patient with my emotional withdrawal than the children, so I rely on family rituals to keep me in touch with them--especially our trips to the library. Although I am quite certain that a significant portion of the children's wing of the downtown library was built with our overdue fees, I show no restraint in the numbers or types of books we bring home. Everyone has her or his own card and can check out as many books and tapes as we together can haul out of the building. We read at bedtime, snuggled up against each other, the perfume of their sweet bodies like jasmine. I see that not everything has changed, and I am reassured.

manuals help me to make sense of the feelings I have and to see how a process of healing just might take place for me. Still a biweekly visitor to the children's section of the library, I am drawn to the early adolescent/young adult *bildungsroman* or quest motif series written by Ursula LeGuin, Lloyd Alexander, and Madeline L'Engle. I read Anne Perry's detective series that feature some of the lurid aspects of Victorian England, and I read Gloria Naylor's *On Brewster Street*, a collection of black women's struggles to survive with dignity in Detroit. From each of these I learn a little bit about what people do to find a way out of their distress; but more importantly, I learn that courage is more akin to determination than to bravery or some special endowment of the hero or heroine. In spite of trials that seem overwhelming--to the character or to me, I come to see that the courageous live from their hearts; they go on through life less fearful, less self-centered though more aware of their limitations and strengths, and more capable of forgiveness. They not only survive their trials, but they thrive. From reading their accounts, fictional or not, I conclude that I will too.

One tale teaches me about those who do not survive, those who feel themselves pushed over the edge of their tolerance. Kate Chopin's ending to *The Awakening* appalls me. I find the main character's suicide so unnecessary and wasteful. On the other hand, I learn enough about struggles with despair to see that despair cannot be courted or dealt with alone.

In the support group each of us is asked to imagine what it is that *I* want. I don't know what I want, so I begin to journal again. And instead of being just a place to dump all my frustration and anger, my journal becomes the confidante for the woman maturing within me. I dream on paper and draw dream houses I would build. I resume writing poetry, bad but caustically funny poetry at which the support group laughs. Now that my youngest is almost three, I can imagine myself capable of caring for my family and going back to school, so I sign up for a class at IPFW: Introduction to Cultural Anthropology. At first my goal is to earn my Bachelor's degree in Anthropology and then my Master's in Social Work as a counselor. But almost as an accident--because there are so few Anthropology classes offered at night, I start to take classes in writing poetry; and eventually, I declare myself an English major as well.

I never thought that I would not go to college. In my dreams, I would attend either Columbia University or the University of Chicago--big name schools in big cities with lots going on--places where people thought big thoughts in great depth. IPFW, known in the 70's as "bypass high," was the choice of last resort, so I was leery about the quality of education I would receive here. Contrary to my expectations, I have enjoyed such a high quality education that each semester I feel as though I have been physically changed

The two disciplines have been invaluable. Anthropology courses teach me about how people relate to one another all over the world, how in a very simplified sense people live in social structures that are maintained by the roles they perform. They have taught me to respect, or to look carefully once more at that which I find distasteful, don't understand, or revere. English literature and writing courses teach me how to articulate to myself and to others how I have read, analyzed, and drawn conclusions from texts. I begin to see texts in an entirely new way--not only as the written word, but rather, as Paulo Friere would say, as a person's experience of the whole world. Everything becomes a text for me. *Together* these two disciplines teach me

the limitations of one perspective. In Anthropology, I am asked to purposefully put my experiences and value system on a shelf so that I might see and examine other people's ways of experiencing the world with as few interferences as possible from my own. In English, I am asked to bring any relevant personal experience into reading and responding to texts so that I might compare and contrast through that lens. Whereas in one discipline I strive to distance myself in order to see new patterns outside my ethnocentric biases, in the other I attempt to immerse myself in the text for the same purpose.

> Years spent in college are in many ways the modern version of the quest: one is taken from the necessarily narrow views of the home, tested with trials that seem overwhelming and at times beyond endurance, and then, celebrated as a hero upon completion. Essential to the quest, and insufficiently recognized as such, are all those who sacrifice on behalf of the hero: her extended family and the friends who support her and do not allow her to lose sight of her dream. They are her teachers as well.

I do not pose these disciplines or perspectives in opposition to one another. Nor are they in a hierarchical relationship. Instead, they are tools invaluable for making sense of the world, both internal and external to the self. In a like manner, literacy is a discipline, an act of courage to understand the world more completely and complexly than through one's original worldview. To achieve literacy, a student has to have a strong support system composed of people willing to sacrifice for the student's benefit. Furthermore, a person may be more or less literate depending on the topic under discussion--and must be treated as someone who already knows something. The know-it-all sixteen year old was probably right: the tools must fit the need of the student--but--the student must also adapt to the discipline. Although reading and writing facilitate literacy, they are not literacy itself. Literacy is something both gained and used in order to know the world, and it is literacy that allows people to leave the roles that society expects them to sustain--the "victim" or the homebound--roles in which I could have remained had I not had the

support system that I have. Perhaps more than any other reason, that is why I now want to teach--to extend that support system to others so that they might know the world and themselves better.

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